

Developing Structures to Support a Culture of Quality



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Abstract

In 2002, EUA embarked on a four-year project, which involved 134 higher education institutions grouped in 18 networks. The major aim of the project was to identify how internal quality culture can be developed and embedded in institutions. The network which looked at partnerships considered these to be valuable structures to support a culture quality which could, at the same time, enhance the national or international appeal of an institution. This paper gives practical advice on setting up partnerships of all types, ranging from other higher education institutions or partners from regional industry, national and international partnerships through to cooperation within the framework of European programmes or informal cooperation in the field of research.

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1. Introduction

European higher education is changing rapidly. The Bologna Declaration has inspired a number of far-reaching reforms, with the intention of creating a transparent and coherent model for higher education within Europe, encouraging internationalisation within higher education, facilitating the mobility of students and teachers and enhancing the attractiveness of European higher education in a global context.

EUA quality culture project

In 2002, EUA embarked upon a four-year quality culture project¹. This involved 134 higher education institutions grouped in 18 networks. The major aim of the project was to identify how internal quality culture could be developed and embedded in institutions.

Some lessons

There are many lessons that can be drawn from this work. It is clear that grass-roots initiatives in higher education are often more effective than top-down directives. The sense of ownership and engagement that develops through grass-roots involvement is critical to success in higher education. This observation applies to both the higher education leadership and public authorities: both can provide the appropriate pre-conditions for quality culture to emerge and develop but they should steer away from imposing it by decree or pre-defining it without discussion with the academic community

Impact

This project has had a very important impact on the discussions linked to the Bologna process and the objective of creating a Europe of knowledge. It demonstrated to policy makers that higher education institutions are aware of and committed to the need to demonstrate and improve their quality and that, as stated by the Berlin Communiqué, “the primary responsibility for quality lies with higher education institutions”.

Network on partnerships

This article is based on the EUA Quality Culture Project Network Report on Partnerships. The members of this network and collective authors of the original report were:

- Belarussian National Technical University: Galina Parfenova, Head of International Programs and Information Department.
- University of Economics in Bratislava: Gizela Lenartova, Vice-Rector for International Relations.
- University of Vienna: Bernard Wallner, Head of Quality Assurance.

¹ The Quality Culture Project reports are available on http://www.eua.be/eua/en/projects_quality.jsp

- University of West Bohemia: Monika Mudrikova, Director of International Office.
- K.U.Leuven: Frank Baert, Director of the K.U.Leuven Association, Network co-ordinator; Piet Hendrikx, Institutional co-ordinator Socrates-Erasmus K.U.Leuven; Elke Timmermans, Staff member International Relations Office K.U.Leuven, Assistant network co-ordinator.

2. Identifying different types of partnerships

In this context, the network worked on the theme of partnerships which were judged essential for improving quality and quality culture in their institutions. The group considered that the time was now ripe to determine strategies for partnerships concerning national and international cooperation and to increase the attractiveness of the institution both for students and researchers by introducing or improving a quality culture and quality management.

The first step in developing structures to support a culture of quality is setting up a partnership. However, there are different levels of partnerships, depending on the scope of their activities, their lifetime, the integration of resources and the resulting type of contract between partners. It is important to realize that not all partnerships operate on the same level or have the same objectives, and this influences the approach towards the partnership from a quality management viewpoint. The different levels are:

- *Individual Partnerships*: In a university, *internal* individual partnerships with researchers, students, and teaching staff constitute the daily operational basis. The scope of these partnerships can be as diverse as the university's activities and they vary in terms of time. Researchers, students and teaching staff are fully integrated in academia as an individual partner, each on the basis of active contributions to be delivered to the university. Hence, these partnerships are of utmost importance for profiling the university and for contributing to its reputation. Besides internal partnerships, individual researchers, students and teaching staff increasingly have *external* contacts and partnerships with individuals of other universities. These contacts or partnerships differ in terms of activities, time and intensity. In most cases, they are not regulated by a contract. They are not characterised by a far-reaching integration of resources, although they constitute a strong basis for subsequent projects, more structural networks and alliances.

Levels of partnerships

Individual partnerships

Projects

- *Projects:* Projects are structured partnerships on a temporary basis with specific objectives and an agreed set of activities to reach the goals within an agreed timetable. Resources from the partners are integrated into the project, possibly supported by external funding. The partnerships are settled by a contract. Projects focus on short term added value by synergetic activities. Project partnerships contribute to the quality of a project by bringing together excellent and active partners in a certain field. Besides other universities, partners can be institutions and organisations from the public and private sector (e.g. companies, regions, governments...).

Networks

- *Networks:* Networks are structured partnerships on a permanent basis with a broad range of objectives and activities within a broader area of research, education or knowledge pooling. Resources are not really integrated, but each partner contributes to some extent to the objectives of the network with the support of a central service. In most cases, the contract is membership based, less focused and hence rather loose. Networks are a basis for co-operation at the individual level as well as for joint projects or alliances. They focus on long term added value by creating a solid basis for co-operation and for profiling the members. Networks can be organised at many levels: by discipline, by faculty, by the university as an institution.

Alliances

- *Alliances:* Alliances are structured partnerships on a long term basis, focusing on (a range of) specific objectives and activities. Alliances integrate resources of the partners involved in order to reach these objectives. The partnership is arranged by a far-reaching agreement and a strong contract. Alliances can bring about more specific, temporary projects. They focus on long term co-operation and can contribute highly to the profile and the reputation of the partners. Alliances can also be organised at different levels: by discipline, by faculty, by the university as an institution.

Merger

- *Merger:* A merger aims at the full integration of objectives, activities and resources of the partners on a permanent basis. Obviously this is subject to a whole set of preparations as to a far-reaching agreement.

To illustrate the diversity of existing partnerships at higher education institutions a matrix (see the end of this present article) was developed. It is simple in its design to take into account the level of cooperation on the one hand and origin and objectives of the partnerships on the other. Other information could also be included, such as cost and output for each partnership. This would develop the matrix into a tool to identify types of partnerships and assess the quality of the partnerships with regard to the input/output ratio. A more complex form of this matrix could be used to create more elaborate computer models, which might be useful for future strategic planning of partnerships within an institution.

3. Quality assurance of partnerships: indicators of quality

3.1 Formal criteria of a partnership

To establish a qualitative and successful partnership, it is important that some formal criteria are clearly determined and agreed upon from the beginning. These formal aspects include:

- | | |
|---|-----------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • who will participate in the partnership (this also means that, within each partner institution or organisation, this has to be determined on which level – e.g. staff member, department or faculty, central services, central leadership – the participation to the partnership is situated) | Who? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a timescale for the partnership (this usually varies according to the type of partnership that is being formed (cf. supra), e.g. a project often has a limited duration, while an alliance normally involves long-term cooperation) | Timescale |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • concrete objectives for the partnership within the determined timescale | Objectives? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a detailed work plan, dividing the tasks to realise the objectives within the given timescale, so that it is clear within the partnership which partner(s) will do what and who has responsibility for any given task | Work plan |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a financial plan dividing the available budget among the partners and allotting specific parts of the finances to specific tasks within the partnership. This makes it necessary to determine which financial support is expected from each partner, what kind of investment the partner institutions are willing to make, and whether the partnership will be supported by central funds or not. | Financial plan |

Once these formal criteria have been agreed on by all the partners, a contract should be drawn up. The signing of a contract is necessary for all types of partnerships (with a possible exception for partnerships at the individual level which often have very few partners, limited objectives and a restricted budget). For partnerships emerging from the framework of national or international programmes for education or research (e.g. European programmes such as Socrates), a standard contract is provided. In other cases, the institutions should develop their own standard contracts to formalise partnerships. Support from central services (e.g. Legal Service) should be provided.

Contract

3.2 Imbedding partnerships in the institution's policy

Added value

It is important for universities to take into account that partnerships should have an added value for the institution: enhancing national or international appeal, attracting international students, improving the quality of curricula or research, pooling knowledge with partners etc. Partnerships are not (or do not have to be) isolated projects that only affect the staff members involved. Future-oriented partnerships serve the policy of the institution.

Guidelines and priorities

Universities benefit the most from the possibilities offered by the different types of partnerships, if they formulate guidelines and priorities and include these in the university's overall policy plan. They should identify preferential partners – both on a regional, national and international level – and formulate a policy with regard to the types of partnership: which types of partnership will be encouraged, how will these types of partnerships be promoted within the institution and will efforts be concentrated on certain disciplines or certain aspects of university life, e.g. research or internationalisation? (E.g. Special bilateral agreements with central funding at the network-partners in Eastern Europe, China, South-Africa and South-America)

History

When determining these guidelines and priorities, it is advisable to take the history of the institution and its regional or national situation into account. Most of the existing partnerships are the result of such factors as e.g. historically important partners, cooperation with local stakeholders such as industry, *inter alia*. It may be an advantage for the university to build its policy upon the efforts and results of past partnerships.

The institution's policy with regard to partnerships should incorporate the priorities of its general mission statement. Partnerships can help to realise certain aspects of this mission statement. (E.g. mission as a research-based university: LERU network²)

Central support

In addition, the priorities and guidelines should clearly indicate which partnerships receive central support and what level of support they receive. The central support should take the form of:

- central administration of partnerships (or central support for the administration of partnerships). This task is usually undertaken by one or more of the central offices of the institution, such as a

² LERU Network : League of European Research Universities, founded in 2002 as an association of research-intensive universities sharing the values of high quality teaching within an environment of internationally competitive research (www.leru.org)

research co-ordination office, curriculum development office, internationalisation office, etc.

- financial support. The university can allocate central funds to priority partnerships (e.g. special fund to stimulate internationalisation initiatives).
- communication of guidelines, policy and priorities with regard to partnerships within and without the institution. Since most of the partnerships within an institution rely heavily on the input and co-operation of teaching staff and researchers on all levels of the institution, it is important to inform them about the targets and priorities formulated by the central leadership.
- training of staff involved in partnerships. (e.g. intercultural training of staff, organized by the Office for International Students and Scholars).

While a university will not be able (and will not choose) to support all partnerships of the institution on a central level, it is important that the academic authorities are aware of existing partnerships and new initiatives. An up-to-date central inventory is necessary. It can be used as a tool to develop individual initiatives into stable and more enduring partnerships that fit into the framework of the institution's adopted policy.

Up-to-date inventory

3.3 Ensuring quality of partnerships: evaluation

Many partnerships seem to be the result of chance rather than a well thought-out policy of the university. They seem to be the result of personal research contacts of an individual teacher. Although these partnerships may be valuable and lead to useful results for the institution, this is not always the case. The central level of the university should at least be aware that a partnership exists (e.g. set up a central database for research contacts etc.) in order to enable an evaluation of the existing partnerships. Partnerships should be assessed regularly and institutions should not be afraid to end partnerships that are inactive or that have not produced any useful results for the institution as a whole. Regular (self) evaluation should be a part of all aspects of quality management.

Regular (self) evaluation

A SWOT-analysis offers a good occasion to evaluate existing partnerships. Existing partnerships are too often left to run their course, without any regular evaluation. Some of the following points of action may prevent this: making an inventory of existing partnerships, defining targets, measuring the cost/benefit ratio of the partnerships and examining the output (is it beneficial for the entire or a large part of the institution, or only for one staff member or a limited group of teachers or researchers?), introducing fixed points of evaluation (e.g. twice a year).

It is necessary to evaluate whether the partnership meets the objectives set out at the beginning of the cooperation (as described above in the section 'formal criteria') according to the agreed timescale and work plan and within the available budget, but also whether the results are in accordance with the university's policy plan. If this is not the case, an institution can decide to decrease the amount of central support (financial and/or administrative) allocated to the partnership, or to stop central support altogether.

Avoid partiality

When evaluating a partnership, it is important to avoid partiality. To quote an example, one university in a partnership made a SWOT-analysis of its partnership with the higher education institutions, and also asked the partner institutions to do the same. While some conclusions were comparable in both analyses, other conclusions were surprisingly different and sometimes the view of university and partner institutions with regard to the success of certain aspects of the cooperation was diametrically opposed. This will lead to interesting discussions in the future and adjustments to the cooperation and the targets of the partnership. When an evaluation takes place within an institution, it is necessary that all stakeholders have the opportunity to share their views. An evaluation from the viewpoint of the central management as well as from the viewpoint of teachers and students is therefore advisable.

There are several indicators for successful partnerships. As well as the clear and well-defined formal criteria and accordance with the participating institutions' policies and mission statements that have already been mentioned, a partnership can be measured by its output: scientific publications, joint seminars, joint degrees, number of mobile staff and students. Good results that are difficult to define in terms of quantity (e.g. end-user satisfaction) should also be included in the evaluation.

A final factor that should be taken into account when evaluating a partnership is the dissemination of the results. These should be communicated to all stakeholders within the partnership and, if applicable, outside the partnership.

4. Quality assurance within partnerships: organisational structure

4.1 Organisation of partnerships within the institution

On the one hand, an institution can adopt either a top-down or a bottom-up approach with regard to partnerships. The academic authorities can decide which (kind of) partnerships are to be adopted and they can impose this decision on departments and staff members. On the other hand, partnerships can grow as a result of individual initiatives from staff members and supported – but not influenced – by central management. Both extremes should be avoided as neither will promote good practice. A balance between the top-down and bottom-up approach will give better results. To promote successful partnerships, a university has to provide adequate central support and guidelines but it should also rely on initiatives and cooperation from individual staff members and departments.

**Top-down and
bottom-up**

The approach towards partnerships will also determine whether the administration of the partnerships should be organised on a central level (by central services) or on a decentralised level (faculties or departments).

The organisation of partnerships will vary between different institutions, but also between different (types of) partnerships within one institution, depending on the type and the objectives of the partnership.

4.2 Organisational structure within the partnerships

The organisation structure within a partnership will vary greatly according to the type of partnership that is adopted. The closer the cooperation the more important it is to have an appropriate and strong organisational structure. For example, on the level of individual contacts, informal communication between the staff members involved is sufficient to reach the objectives. On a higher level of partnership, e.g. projects and networks, a formal structure with a coordinating institution is required which will then be reflected in the contract. In the case of alliances and mergers, an even sharper organisation concept will be adopted.

**Need for appropriate
structure**

Continuity and sustainability

The key to a good organisation of a partnership is to ensure continuation and sustainability. Too often a partnership is dependent for its continuation on the efforts of one staff member within each partner institution. Should one of these key persons disappear, the continuation of the partnership is threatened. Therefore central support for important partnerships is vital.

Other elements of attention are the representativity of the organisational structure, the possibility to take decisions that are carried out by all partners, and the transparency of decisions and implementation structures.

5. Introducing systems of quality management within an institution

Use existing models

Much time can be saved and disappointment and mistakes avoided by basing the system of quality management on existing models of good practice. However, no system can be adopted without adapting it to the specificities of the institution with its own tradition and aspirations. Therefore only models that can easily be modified or that do not have to be fully implemented in order to be functional can be used.

The establishment of offices to facilitate quality management or the management of partnerships within institutions, e.g. an office of external relations, an industry liaison office or a quality office, is a first step in the right direction.

Where an established system for quality management already exists, it would be advisable to incorporate existing systems such as ECTS in order to facilitate international cooperation and enhance the transparency and attractiveness of their study curriculum towards international students.

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations have been drawn up by the network and are deemed essential if partnerships are to be a success:

- It is very important to identify the types of partnerships to be entered into:
 - individual partnerships
 - projects
 - networks
 - alliances
 - mergers.
- The formal criteria for the partnership must be clearly determined in terms of:
 - partners
 - timescale
 - work plan
 - budget
 - objectives.
- These formal criteria must be recorded in a contract.
- The added value of partnerships for the institution should be identified.
- Guidelines and priorities should be included in the institution's policy plan and mission statement.
- Adequate central support (administration, financial support, communication and training) should be provided.
- A central inventory of existing partnerships should be drawn up and developed.
- Regular (self) evaluation is essential and should include all stakeholders.
- Partiality of the evaluation should be avoided.
- An evaluation should be based on all aspects that determine a successful partnership

7.3 University Partnerships in a Knowledge Society: Matrix

| | LEVELS | | | | | |
|----------------------|------------------|------------|---------|---------|----------|--------|
| Objectives & Origins | partnerships for | individual | project | network | alliance | merger |
| | research | | | | | |
| | learning | | | | | |
| | teaching | | | | | |
| | knowledge pool | | | | | |

Table C 2.4-1-1

Matrix to be completed by the university identifying partnership levels

| Objectives & Origins | LEVELS | | | | | |
|----------------------|------------------|---|---|---|---|-----------------------------|
| | partnerships for | individual | Project | network | alliance | merger |
| | research | Internal re-search interactions; external research interactions | Quality Culture projects: Research Management; Projects (ca. 3000) in IWETO database (= re-search database) | LERU (League of European Research-intensive Universities) EUA | | |
| | learning | Internal student interactions; external student interactions | Quality Culture Projects: Teaching and Learning; Erasmus Project „Multiculture Communication in International Economic Relations“ Summer School | Erasmus networks, networks for specific subject areas | Association : steering group Lifelong Education: lifelong learning, mixed study careers and guidance | National Rectors Conference |
| | teaching | Internal staff interactions; external staff interactions | Quality Culture Projects: Teaching and Learning / Implementing Bologna Reforms; Coimbra Group Postgraduate Winter School | LERU Coimbra Group EUA BusiNet (application for the Medical world) | Association : steering group Education : educational aspects of academic education, joint quality indicators, school of education, steering group Teacher Training; | National Rectors Conference |
| | knowledge pool | | | | University Association | |

Table C 2.4-1-2

Example of a fictional completed form

C 2.4-1**Implementing Bologna in your institution**

Embedding a quality culture in institutions

Developing structures to support a culture of quality

Biographies:

Frank Baert, Prof., is managing director of the K.U.Leuven Association. The K.U.Leuven Association is based on a close co-operation between the K.U.Leuven and twelve other institutions of higher education ("hogescholen"). Its members have a total of more than 70.000 students in campuses across Flanders. The primary aims of the K.U.Leuven Association are to offer a wide range of study and training, to improve the quality of education and to improve the quality of research by concentration and an intensive co-operation.

Elke Timmermans co-ordinates the Socrates projects and Erasmus student and teacher exchanges at the K.U.Leuven. She is also institutional ECTS co-ordinator and has been involved in co-ordinating the ECTS label application of the K.U.Leuven.